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NEW YORK TIMES
15 FEBRUARY 1983

Soviet Ships Came Close, Navy Says

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 14 — Two Soviet warships recently sailed within 50 miles of the Gulf Coast, United States Navy officers said today.

The officers said it was the closest that Soviet warships had come to the United States since they periodically began deploying to the Caribbean in 1969. The ships were of the type that carry nuclear weapons, but the naval officers were not certain that such arms were aboard.

The two ships, a guided-missile cruiser and a frigate, were part of a flotilla of four vessels that was in the Caribbean from Nov. 25 until Feb. 2, which the officers said was the longest stay in those waters by a Soviet squadron since 1978.

Submarine in the Flotilla

One of the other two vessels was an advanced submarine powered by diesel and electric engines and designed for quiet operations, including intelligence gathering, in shallow waters. The

fourth vessel was a supply ship.

Senior United States Navy officers have expressed concern over the recently acquired ability of the Soviet Navy to project and sustain ships far from Soviet waters even though, as in this deployment, their ships spend more time in port than at sea.

Those officers have also expressed concern over possible Soviet blocking of Caribbean sea lanes through which oil and raw materials are shipped into the United States and troops, arms, and supplies would move from Gulf ports to Europe in the event of a war there.

In this case, the Soviet ships visited Havana and Cienfuegos in Cuba on goodwill visits and took part in antisubmarine exercises with a Cuban frigate and several submarine chasers, all of which had been furnished to Cuba by the Soviet Union.

United States Navy officers suggested that the Soviet antisubmarine exercises underscored their point, since it would be the task of American submarines, along with surface ships and aircraft, to fend off a Soviet threat during hostilities.

50 Miles Off Mississippi

In mid-January, the officers said, the cruiser and the frigate broke off from the squadron and sailed north to a point 50 miles from the Mississippi Delta, then turned west and went around the Gulf of Mexico before returning to Cienfuegos, the Cuban naval base.

The two ships were under United States Navy surveillance by frigates and aircraft the entire time, the naval officers said, but at no time did the Soviet ships attempt maneuvers that could be called provocative.

Since 1969, the officers said, the Soviet Union has sent ships to Cuba and the Caribbean 22 times, usually twice a year. On this visit, the oiler for the first time fueled a Soviet intelligence trawler, which was sailing off the coast of Florida and presumably monitoring American missile tests.

The two Soviet ships that sailed near the Gulf Coast were well outside the three-mile United States territorial limit but well within the 200-mile economic, or fishing, zone the United States claims.

Conversely, military analysts said, the United States has sent warships within similar ranges of the Soviet Union in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic Ocean and in the Sea of Japan.

The largest of the Soviet ships was the guided-missile cruiser Admiral Isakov, a 7,600-ton ship capable of 34 knots, which is faster than comparable United States cruisers. The ship is armed with antisubmarine missiles and depth charges.

The second surface combatant was the frigate Rezvy, a 3,800-ton ship capable of 32 knots and armed with antisubmarine missiles and depth charges.

The submarine was of the class designated Tango by NATO, a 3,800-ton that does 20 knots on the surface and 16 knots underwater. According to the authoritative publication Jane's Fighting Ships, the Tango submarines are intended for patrolling in shallow waters.

The supply ship Genrik Gasanov is among the Soviet Navy's modern long-range replenishment vessels capable of carrying both fuel and solid supplies. The ship can carry 13,000 tons of fuel, 500 tons of fresh water and 400 tons each of food and spare parts.

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